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Emotional Engagement in Fashion Design

Mal Burkinshaw and Linda Shearer

Abstract

The fashion industry has a very narrow approach to diversity of image and there is clear evidence that the industry continues to promote an unhealthy and generic view of body shape, beauty, race and age. We are entering an era where emotion and experience are increasingly important in both personal and professional development. People are looking for diversity, meaning and integrity in what they do and what they buy and are embracing individualism after a prolonged period of mass-market consumption.

The Emotional Engagement project aims to explore how specific design elements such as colour, size and style affect consumer behaviour and whether psychological issues related to identity and wellbeing can be fused into fashion to satisfy and comfort the consumer. It also aims to transform current thinking about fashion education and consumption and add a new dimension to the way in which businesses engage with their products, markets and consumers. This project is unique in placing emotional consideration at its core in seeking to examine and question the methods currently adopted throughout the fashion supply chain, particularly those that involve image, such as design and marketing. It takes an inter-disciplinary approach by bringing together areas of science, design, technology, psychology and business. Further, it aims to disseminate best practice by engaging with relevant stakeholders and the wider community and takes an inclusive approach.

It is the responsibility of fashion educators to develop in our future fashion designers and influencers, the importance of developing emotional consideration to consumers. The research will ultimately underpin and inform how we educate students to become more aware of the emotional impact of their design messaging and will develop, through creative and exciting educational methods, a sustainable approach to emotional engagement in fashion.

Key Words: Emotional engagement, diversity, considerate design, beauty, identity, fashion, size.

1. Context

The Emotional Engagement project is currently a collaboration of researchers/academics from four Scottish Fashion Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). The vision for the project is to develop a new way of thinking about fashion that takes account of the end users and their needs. At its core is a desire to

engage and encourage fashion students and industry professionals to take a more 'considerate' approach to design, to acknowledge and embrace diversity and to put the end user at the forefront of decision making. The project is at an incipient stage but has already attracted support from All Walks Beyond the Catwalk who are supporting the Centre of Excellence for Diversity at Edinburgh College of Art. The EE project comprises two broad areas:

- the 'integration' of emotional consideration within fashion education (All Walks Centre of Excellence for Diversity)
- research related to emotional engagement

This paper outlines the early work in progress of the project with the aim of stimulating dialogue and feedback. It will focus on the pedagogy of the All Walks Beyond the Catwalk, 'Icon Project', undertaken by Edinburgh College of Art as an initial introduction to Emotional Engagement in Fashion Design.

2. Icon Project

The key objective of the All Walks Centre of Educational Excellence for Diversity Centre is to generate, implement and oversee All Walks Diversity Projects within institutions nationally. In the session 2010/2011, Edinburgh College of Art introduced the All Walks Beyond the Catwalk, Icon Project. The project philosophy was designed to target students at an early educational stage; when they would be impressionable, receptive to new ideas, and able to apply the philosophy of Emotionally Considerate Design to subsequent projects. The Icon Project was therefore designed within the educational programme at Second Year Level; the stage when design students specialise in the subject of fashion design and the philosophy was also introduced to the learning outcomes of all year group projects from stage 2 to MA level.

It was identified that students have a tendency to design for an industry standard model proportion, normally a size 10, without fully considering how their work will appeal and address the spectrum of consumer diversity. By allowing students to place so much focus on fashion shows and models as end content for their work, educators become increasingly responsible for encouraging a restrictive and elitist industry that works against the notion that fashion design should be accessible to all. It was concurred that the purpose of fashion should be to make the wearer/consumer more confident and happy about themselves, both physically and emotionally. The students were therefore asked to design an outfit for a woman who represents diversity of image, the aim being to creatively address her emotional needs whilst also creating a directional and high-end contemporary aesthetic.

By implementing written project content and through verbal lecturing techniques in the studio, all staff members were asked to trial and feedback educational methods on the subject of consideration to body and beauty diversity within design processes. This freedom to experiment academically has helped to

develop the main principles and the need for a research strategy to underpin the educational content.

3. The Process

Prior to being issued with the design brief the students attended a lecture where the concept and reasoning for developing Emotionally Considerate Design within the curricula at ECA was discussed. At this event, Caryn Franklin gave an inspirational presentation about the All Walks Beyond the Catwalk vision and showed a series of photographs by celebrated fashion photographer Rankin, which were produced under the title 'Snapped'. These images, which represented a diversity of models, were exhibited at the National Portrait Gallery in London and demonstrated to the students how fashion can be communicated through diverse representation of beauty, in a modern and dynamic way.

Following the showing of a short film of a fashion show by a well known design brand, in which the models were extremely thin, they discussed why this messaging is so unhealthy for designers and consumers. New students are presented with images of models in fashion shows, and often accept these images to be 'the norm'. This significantly direct approach was intended to confront students' understanding of what is acceptable. The lecture attempted to provide a platform for students to challenge notions of ideal beauty within fashion messaging, including catwalk and fashion publishing.

Leading on from the lecture the students were invited to exhibit imagery, film and drawings that communicated their feelings about 'Beauty within Fashion'. The objective of the exhibition was to commence the project with an individual point of view about what they viewed as inspirational beauty. The project required each student to connect with a different woman, referred to as their 'Design Icon,' the intention being to introduce the notion that each woman represented key inspirational qualities. Prior to the set up of the exhibits, the students were not given information about the Icon Project. The lecturing team sourced the women with the prerequisite that, as an entire group, they would represent diversity of body image, age, race and beauty. In total 22 women were identified for the project, ranging in age from 22 to 65, in size from a size 10 to 18 and with a broad ethnic demographic. Specifically they were women who each had a strong identity through personal style, or whom, we felt, would connect with the project philosophy. The students and Icons first met each other at the Beauty within Fashion exhibition where they were invited to interact, using the exhibition content as a primary point of discussion. This process proved successful in pairing each Icon with a student, notably with many of the partnerships occurring naturally and instinctively.

The students were allocated the task of researching their icon through a variety of journalistic and photographic methods. They were required to research and develop an understanding of their Icon's emotional feelings on a range of fashion

related subjects, including her views on body self confidence and her perceptions of beauty and self esteem. The aim of such verbal and written analysis was to encourage each student to develop an emotional awareness of his/her Icon before proceeding to design. The Icons were asked not to direct their individual designers in what to design but to advise them to consider her emotional viewpoint on the garments during fittings. It was strongly felt that should the Icon start to dictate the design content, an element of emotionally considerate learning would not be achieved. Ultimately the student designer had to lead the design process in order the stop the project becoming a traditional 'made to order' scenario.

The students were asked to record a series of body measurements to inform their design process and cutting work. By photographing their icon against a plain background from a variety of angles, it was intended that the student would capture their muse's natural beauty and body type. In addition the students were taught the importance of developing a discreet, considerate and respectful approach during this process by exchanging in sensitive and complimentary dialogue. This helped the students to build a trusting relationship between designer and client.

4. Project Outputs

The first key output for the students to evidence an understanding of the project aims was a collaborative exhibition titled 'Beyond Beauty', showcasing a portrait shot of each Icon, presented in a gallery style and accompanied by a statement to celebrate her natural beauty and body shape. The project also asked each student to research how fashion currently addresses the issue of body and beauty diversity. This research allowed the students to demonstrate an understanding of who has explored this subject through design and fashion messaging already. This helped them to underpin the project approach with a clear historical analysis. After the students had collated and evidenced their research, they proceeded to investigate design through a combination of creative cutting and flat pattern drafting. Both methods of pattern cutting were taught to the students as separate modules in the previous Semester, and this project asked them to develop an understanding of how to work with both methods, which is a key element of their future studies. It was highly important, that the All Walks Icon Project still provided the students with the mandatory academic skills required from the course.

Another core component of a fashion design course is in teaching the students about fabric qualities and their application toward fashion design. The Icon Project asked the students to prototype their ideas in jersey fabrics, one of the most common fashion fabrics internationally. To ensure parity in the technical aspects and cohesion of the collection, the fabrics were sourced by the lecturing team in a broad colour spectrum, so that the students were able to consider the emotional impact of colour on their Icon. Each student was then able to select colours that they felt flattered the body and worked with the variety of skin tones represented within the group.

The students proceeded to work with two lecturers in design and pattern-cutting, who each has firsthand experience of bespoke design on a one to one client basis, and who were therefore suited to the roles of overseeing the project development. Key to the success of the project was in ensuring that emotional consideration to the Icon was encouraged within lecturer to student dialogue. Each week the design lecturer would maintain an overview of the methods that the students were using to understand diversity of image. The majority of the students was highly receptive to this concept and developed close working relationships with their Icon.

The project also demanded that the students retained responsibility for allocating and timetabling key meetings with their Icon into their curriculum. Rather than comprehensively structure all the project timescales for the students, it was felt that by asking them to self-direct key aspects of the project, they would develop important transferable skills. The students were asked to evidence the results of fittings and design meetings twice a week, in design and cutting classes, where the lecturers would note which students demonstrated the ability to self direct their studies and, more importantly, the extent to which each student was engaging with the project.

Not all students demonstrated 'emotional consideration' to their Icon and in such instances the lecturers met with the students in question to discuss this. To manage the situation in a non-confrontational way, each student was asked to consider how their Icon must have felt emotionally by the lack of contact, and the effect it would have on her self-esteem; for example that the Icon thought that the student did not like her personally, or had found her age or body type inspiring. Once the student understood that poor time keeping and attitude to the project had a direct negative emotional impact on another individual she proceeded to work with her Icon both sensitively and appropriately. This scenario occurred with two students out of twenty-two, and whilst it was initially viewed this as a failure of the project, it soon became apparent that this was a core part of the learning process for the students.

The key outcome of the project was to provide a showcased segment during the annual Edinburgh College of Art fashion show in 2011. Presented in Salon Style, without a catwalk, the task of integrating non-models within such a high profile show proved to be both frustrating and inspirational. The Icons were asked not to make eye contact with the audience, and to walk in a natural way, at a slow pace. It was communicated that the Icons were not expected to act or walk like professional models, and that this showcase was a celebration of natural beauty. Feedback from the show was, in the majority, positive. Many women attending the show found the All Walks Icon Project to be inspiring and confidence building.

Backstage the majority of Icons spoke of feeling confident and attractive, and this was in stark contrast to how they had anticipated they might feel at the fashion show. It was also noted how caring the students appeared to be towards each Icon,

how they would ensure she had water, food or a chair whilst she was waiting to model. Many of the students stated that they were sad to have finished the partnerships, and that the Icons had become to them like friends or family.

5. Conclusion

Based on the feedback from staff and students it was evident that this trial of Emotionally Considerate Design had proved to be educationally viable and of importance for future development within the academic curriculum. The students were highly receptive to considering diverse body and beauty ideals as part of the design process. Their feedback indicated that the project had impacted on their perception of image and beauty and that they had engaged directly with their Icon at an emotional level far beyond that of a personal bespoke service situation. The project also appeared to have a subsequent impact on the level 3 and level 4 design work which demonstrated a wider consumer market and age base than in previous years.

The project is being repeated In Edinburgh of Art during the academic session 2011/12, this time with students indentifying and selecting their own Icons. The ethos of this project is also being applied to Emotional Engagement projects at other institutions across the UK, in fashion, jewellery, photography, branding and marketing. In parallel to the design project, the Emotional Engagement research project aims to explore further possibilities of embracing diversity through emotional consideration in fashion.

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